Opinion – Lessons America's Adversaries Can Learn from the Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted many state systems, but it seems to have been particularly troublesome for Western democracies. These highlighted differences between state systems not only allows Western democracies a glimpse into their own potential shortfalls but it also allows the enemies of western democracies to learn some interesting strategic lessons. As the United States was hit particularly hard by the pandemic, this paper will explore a few of the key lessons America's adversaries may be learning and the security dilemmas these lessons may pose for America in the future.

The Covid-19 crisis began in Wuhan, China in late December or early January. It quickly spread and began producing an initially reported death rate of about 3.5 percent in China. The death rate coupled with the rapid spread, frightened the global community. China acted quickly to the novel corona virus, quarantining Wuhan and many other affected areas. China was uniquely positioned as an autocratic regime to respond. China already utilized an invasive surveillance system that could identify almost any citizen and, to help enforce the quarantine, China used Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to monitor compliance further. Anyone caught breaking the quarantine was punished severely.

Covid-19 soon hit South Korea, and despite South Korea being a democratic republic, the government and the people worked together in a strict quarantine situation to dramatically stop the virus from spreading. There were no draconian measures or enforcement mechanisms. Instead, there was a trust of the government on the part of the public and a more collectivist culture that caused everyone to join forces to stop the spread of Covid-19. Even the religious group that seemed to have brought the virus to South Korea apologized, cancelled services, and strictly adhered to the quarantine orders. There were no protests of the state imposed quarantine and no noticeable public outcry on social media.

However, when Covid-19 hit western democracies, the response was slow and the result was disastrous. Italy was the first western democracy hit by Covid-19, and the government and people basically ignored the problem. Within less than a month Italy was overwhelmed. The healthcare system ran out of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) first and the subsequent capacity to treat patients. The death rate skyrocketed to 10 percent, and Italy led the world for a while in both number of cases and death rate. Italy eventually had to impose a nationwide quarantine, which had only recently begun to slow the case rate. Unfortunately, the nationwide quarantine has had devastating effects on the Italian economy with no end in sight to the national quarantine. Great Britain followed Spain and reacted badly as well. While Prime Minister Boris Johnson attempted to slow the spread of Covid-19, the British government eventually had to impose a nationwide quarantine as well. Some in the British governmental and healthcare community had speculated the quarantine could last for months. Prime Minister Boris Johnson eventually became the first major leader to contract Covid-19 and be hospitalized in intensive care for weeks.

The United States had months to prepare and learn from other nations dealing with the quarantine. Unfortunately, the United States government and healthcare system failed to plan or prepare for the inevitable outbreak. President Trump did ban travel from China, but even that action likely came too late. The United States had a second chance when it was clear that major outbreaks were occurring in Seattle, Washington, San Francisco, California, and New

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York, NY. The United States could have applied a strict quarantine on these areas, similar to what South Korea did, but the United States government did virtually nothing. Healthcare providers failed to prepare to expand capacity, stockpile or make PPE, and increase cooperation between hospitals and states.

The United States ended up mirroring Italy and then eventually overtaking Italy to claim the world's top spot in terms of Covid-19 cases and deaths. President Trump eventually declared a national emergency and a patchwork of states began shutting down portions of the economy and issuing stay at home orders. As of the writing of this paper, no national quarantine has been imposed and it remains unclear whether or not social distancing and spotty stay at home orders will slow the spread of the virus. Still, President Trump has hinted that the economy should begin slowly reopening in May, which may result in a resurgence of cases. This is an election year in the United States, and the American economy has been devastated. JP Morgan anticipates a recession and unemployment ranging from 20 to 40 percent.

What an adversary like China could learn from this response is intriguing and potentially strategically devastating. Western democracies have responded poorly, but this is anticipatable as democratic government are often reactive instead of proactive when faced with crises.   Democracies are charged with protecting human rights, civil liberties, engendering economic activity, and providing infrastructure and basic services. When a threat like Covid-19 or international terrorism manifests, democratic governments are often slow to react because reaction often creates a paradox whereby safety or prevention of a foreseeable threat infringes on the very human rights, civil liberties, economy, and basic services democratic governments are charged with maintaining. It is therefore not uncommon for democratic governments to absorb a devastating first blow which could have been proactively mitigated if not avoided before acting to infringe on these core rights.

This point is especially true when the response that is called for infringes on basic freedoms. All of this is exacerbated in the United States, which does not have a strong sense of communalism or trust in the government. American individualism and ingenuity are almost always strengths for the American system, but China may have noticed that the emphasis on individualism is a weakness in a pandemic. This weakness could be further exploited over social media by infiltrating various American political sites and arguing that the government has no right to restrict freedom of movement and association. Further, Easter in America highlighted the tension between stay at home orders and religious freedom. China could again stoke the fire by arguing that the state and local governments are infringing on religious freedom which may elicit an even more emotional response in future pandemics, should China or Russia choose to exploit the situation.

China is aware of how fragile American and western democratic economies are. One of the main problems comes from just-in-time manufacturing, which creates great efficiencies in capitalism but is ill-equipped to deal with disruptions and shortages. Deng Xiaoping callously threatened to cut off the supply of Active Pharmaceutical Ingredients (API) to the United States exposing a key strategic vulnerability. This is just the tip of the iceberg. The United States, like Italy, quickly ran out of PPE, ventilators, and even hospital beds. The economy almost instantly ran short on toilet paper, meat, eggs, and milk. Other shortages began developing. The economy plummeted, but many areas of the economy quickly ran out of needed supplies to continue operations.

The effects of repeated pandemics could be more devasting than war on the economies of the western democratic world. China may be learning this lesson as well. The United States is not an adaptive system at this point; even switching to telework has been difficult in industries that could support such work. Americans are brailing and, in some cases, defying stay at home orders with little consequence. China or another US adversary could learn that creating pandemics in the West would be one of the best ways to bring down the western world order.

There have been some claims that China manufactured Covid-19, but this seems far-fetched. China has been blamed for letting Covid-19 out of Wuhan, and they have responded by accusing the United States of releasing the virus on China. This seems ridiculous, but this narrative is gaining traction in China and amongst China's allies. A simple way around this dilemma, should China or another adversary decide to consciously release pandemics on the western world, is to engage operatives in the release of the virus in the western world first. If China had operatives spread the virus in America, and the vector of the virus could be traced back to America, it is hard to imagine how the

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West could craft a convincing narrative that China was to blame even if some evidence is later produced. Often in a narrative war, the first to market wins, and the facts trail meekly behind. The international ire China is currently suffering would be aimed at the United States in a future attack.

Potential ways to address these problems, and more depth to this systemic analysis, will be provided in a book I am working on, tentatively titled *Breaking Point*. The point of this article is to engage discussion on the topic and to urge US policymakers to seriously consider the potential future militarization of pandemic. If we fail to examine scenarios of weaponization or scenarios of pandemics worse than Covid-19, we will suffer similar results, and western democracies may find it hard to recover from such future events.

The views expressed here are the author's and do not represent the Department of Defense, US Army, or Command and General Staff College.

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Dan G. Cox is a professor of political science at the US Army School of Advanced Military Studies. He is interested in systems thinking, operational art, strategy, and anticipating the future of conflict. He is currently working on a book anticipating future pandemic shocks and their implications tentatively entitled *Breaking Point*.